To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.

161 March, 1951

RURAL SALVATION

By Ray F. Magnuson*

HOLBROOK LIBRARY PACIFIC SCHOOL OF RELIGION

For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. — John 3: 17

If rural America is to be saved for Christ and his Kingdom, the time is at hand when we must give more attention to salvation and the theological aspects of our task. Those of us who have been identified with a rural life movement in the last two or three decades have been thankful that the rural church has been in the midst of it. The frame of reference of this movement has, of course, been socio-economic. And who of us does not appreciate the contribution which rural sociologists and rural economists have made to the rural church? But, if the rural church is to perform its unique function in helping to redeem rural communities, it must be more than a social institution.

Rural salvation is more than a process of determined human effort. Perhaps the time has come when the question, What shall we do to save rural America? needs to be superseded by inquiry, such as, What does God want done in rural America? And who can know the mind of God? Surely none of us can speak dogmatically at this point. Dr. Mark Dawber was reported by The Christian Century a few months ago as saying that a special committee should be raised under the Federal (now National) Council of Churches to probe into the theological aspects of rural life. Others have enthusiastically shared this view. Perhaps this will soon be done. In the meantime we cannot wait. This paper is offered as a small beginning in what should be a long and careful development in this field, a labor of love carried on by men and women who not

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* During the Annual Meeting of The Christian Rural Fellowship held at Lincoln, Nebraska, in November 1951, the need for more thinking in the fields of rural theology and rural salvation was stressed by several. Rev. Ray F. Magnuson was invited to share his thinking with us, and we are greatly indebted to him for this helpful, pioneer manuscript. In submitting this, he hopes it will encourage others to write on this important subject. While he conferred with other churchmen like Aaron Rapking, Mark Dawber, Edward Ziegler, Mark Rich, Eugene Smathers, and Shirley Greene, and acknowledges this help, he accepts responsibility personally for the views expressed. -- I. W. Moomaw

only have a firsthand knowledge of rural life but who have a fair understanding of theology and the Bible itself. There are many rural ministers and not a few laymen who need to speak and write on this subject. Like Amos of old, they need to give articulate expression to the fires that are burning within their souls. A false humility needs to be set aside. Let him who has a word from God say it.

IN DEFENSE OF AN ADJECTIVE

To discuss "rural" salvation is to run the risk of offending the sensibilities of those whose concepts are preferably couched in universals. For many, who live in the high towers of current theological opinion, to apply the adjective "rural" is to attach a meaningless limitation upon a great Christian idea. In agreement with them are many of the new religious groups, most of which have a biblically-documented theology of salvation very carefully worked out. Whether one lives in the city or in the country makes not one whit of difference -- if you are saved, you are saved, and that's that.

Granted that Christianity and salvation are universal ideas, four observations need to be made. First, every universal teaching must be particularized to give it meaning. The application of the doctrine of salvation must be realized in rural life. This point should not need elaboration. The work of the church is different in the country than it is in the city, just as there are differences between the work of the church in India and in the United States. Therefore, from the standpoint of its application to rural life we are justified in using the term which forms the title of this paper. And while much has been written and demonstrated on the application of Christianity to rural life, much more needs to be said and done.

Second, there is something universal about the ruralness of mankind. It is the thesis of this article that, apart from a consideration of man's inherent ruralness, salvation in the fullest sense cannot be realized. Man was made to live in a garden. He may endure the abnormal atmosphere of the city for a season, but eventually he must either move out or die. His may be a slow death, requiring four or five generations, but as population data indicate, his demise is no less certain for its lingering characteristics. Happily, the recent census shows that Americans are no longer expanding the populations of the larger cities. There is a marked trend in the direction of the decentralization of industry, making possible a more normal life for those employed. Even where their employment is still in the cities, millions of people prefer the discomfort of long-distance commuting from rural and small-town homes rather than living within the city itself. All this bears evidence to man's incurable, almost instinctive, urge to make his home in the more natural environs of the countryside. There is something in his soul which, like a homing pigeon, leads him back to the soil from which he sprang.

A third observation to support the apologetic for a rural emphasis in our theology is that we have a rural Christ. He was both the rural Christ and the universal Christ. The rural background of his life and ministry did not limit his universality; on the contrary, it enhanced it. One will be forgiven for taking liberties with the biblical idiom in these defensive sentences:

"O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe: Ought not Christ to have been born in a little town called Bethlehem, with his bed a cattle stall?

Ought not he have been reared in a little village called Nazareth, where he labored in a carpenter shop and where he came to know intimately his Father's world of birds and flowers and sea and sky? Ought not his ministry to have taken place in the small villages and towns of rural Palestine as he traveled the dusty roads and walked through the fields from place to place? Ought not the greatest sermon ever preached to have been delivered from a small mountain out under the open sky where rocks and hills provided a perfect sounding-board for words which were more eternal than the hills themselves?"

He was the rural, universal Christ. Minimize his ruralness and you have subtracted from his universality.

This brings us to the fourth conclusion, namely, that out of the rich treasuries of the gospel as recorded in the Bible we have universal principles which have unique application to the rural scene. There is a peculiar sense in which Jesus and the Kingdom of God fit the people whose environs are the open sky and country landscape. This is true not just because Jesus revealed his truth through rural parable and incident but because the goals of his ministry, when carried to their ultimate conclusion, called for a way of life that only rural environs can fully supply. This is not to say that the Kingdom cannot take root even in the hard pavements of city life. It can and does. Christianity is not a weak, hothouse plant. It can grow under adverse circumstances. But the Kingdom of God is "at home" in the country. The words "rural" and "salvation" are like chemicals that have a strong affinity for each other. They belong together.

ROME AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The all-inclusive idea or frame of reference within which rural salvation is to be realized is the Kingdom of God. If we understand what Jesus meant by his Kingdom, we should be able to better comprehend what he meant by salvation. Certainly it cannot be too greatly emphasized that the Kingdom of God, as proclaimed by Jesus, bears the unmistakable imprint of his own mind and heart. This point is relevant as we think about rural salvation. When we realize that much of our doctrine relating to salvation was developed by Paul, the great urbanite, we are obligated to exercise cautious discrimination in our search for a gospel adequate for rural life. For it is to be doubted that Paul's mind occupied itself with rural life or rural salvation. The problems he faced were the problems of a corrupt urbanism as manifested in such cities as Corinth and Rome. We, therefore, do well to re-examine the historical situation in which the early Christian Church developed and, having examined it, to discover if possible the relationship of that situation to the kind of doctrine which Paul and other early Christian leaders developed. Was there a relationship between the fact that the early Christian Church was predominantly a city church and the doctrines developed to meet the problems which grew out of the socio-economic situation in which the church found itself? We believe there was.

Paul did not preach a different gospel from that of Jesus. Paul preached the same gospel of the Kingdom that Jesus preached. And yet, because of his environment he felt constrained to emphasize, and perhaps overemphasize, certain truths of the gospel with a corresponding minimizing of other gospel truths. The Kingdom of God was a coin of two sides: on one side was love; on the other, judgment. It is not to be wondered that Paul felt compelled to

hold up the judgment side of the coin more often than the love side as he faced the gross immoralities of the cities in which he preached. One can sympathize with Paul's dark view of human nature when he recalls how deeply even members of the churches were involved in debauchery and vice. One can appreciate how appealing was the message of apocalypticism when one views the social, economic, and political life of Rome of that day, with the seal of death upon it. It was a doomed culture, and Paul with other Christian leaders knew it. Therefore, Paul's message of judgment, with its emphasis on escape and withdrawal, was the only message to be preached under the circumstances. Nevertheless, it was an emphasis on salvage rather than total salvation.

Paul also preached the brighter side of the Kingdom. He was most like Jesus when he talked about love. And although the early church was apocalyptic in its outlook, it nevertheless gave a daily demonstration of what love can do in human affairs. Within the cities, colonies of heaven began to take form. Paradoxically, while denying the world, the church began to save the world. Without intending to do so, the church began to establish a new order, even within the cities where death and decay were most evident. Christian family and a new community life, driven underground, became the subterranean seedbeds of the better way -- in fact, the Way. It was the love of Christ that made this conquest possible.

And yet it was never a complete conquest. One has only to read the history of Rome from Constantine to the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 to understand how quickly Christian victory could be turned into defeat. A victorious Christian Church itself became imperialistic. After two so-called "Christian" emperors had finished their respective reigns, they were succeeded by Julian the Pagan, who was welcomed by pagans and Christians alike as a deliverer from the harsh, arbitrary government of "Christian" Constantius. Only after Julian became a persecutor of the church did it regain something of its original power and strength. Thus did the ebb and flow of Christian influence continue for several centuries. It was a continuous struggle between Christianity and an empire which, for good reason, bore the name of its most important city, Rome. As long as the church could bear witness to the Kingdom as a protest against the evils in the established order, it was superb and undefeatable. But when given an opportunity to replace the old order with a Christian order, it failed. The best it could do was to establish a new kind of Roman imperialism.

One ponders on this tragic deficiency of Christianity in Roman history. One speculates on what might have happened had the church been as zealous in evangelizing the rural areas of Italy as it was in winning Rome to Christianity. Rural Italy was the last stronghold of paganism, and by the time it was more or less forcibly "evangelized" by an imperious church, the Roman Empire came to an end. The Empire died for lack of men to fill the ranks of depleted armies. Its disease was a way of life, characteristic of urban life of every known age, in which birth rate declines and population decreases. In centering its efforts in the cities the church, in spite of its message of judgment and love, tied itself to the destinies of a dying order. The miracle of history is that the church survived at all.

WHEN JESUS LIVED AMONG US

It is not the purpose of this article to attempt to differentiate be-

tween the "gospel of Paul" and the "gospel of Jesus." Fundamentally there was no difference. There was only one "Kingdom of God," and Paul was loyal to its basic concepts. Paul preached only the Kingdom of his Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. The outline of that Kingdom is written large for us in the gospel stories. And while these accounts, as we have them today, were written later than Paul's letters, they nevertheless constitute a reliable source of what Jesus thought and taught and did. That Paul was familiar with these same details of the life and teachings of Jesus can hardly be open to question. It was Paul's beloved Luke who wrote one of the accounts. Luke only rewrote what many others before him had written many times.

These primitive accounts of the life of Jesus and his Kingdom stand in relation to later church history as if one were to see the glory of a clear sunrise which in an hour or two would give way to cloudy skies. The gospel of the Kingdom which Paul carried to the cities of his day shone bright enough, even through the clouds of a decadent urbanism, to provide daylight for an otherwise dark world. Even so, there is a difference between daylight and sunlight. It is, therefore, no discredit to Paul nor to the early Christian Church, which was predominantly a city church, to suggest that if we are to have a gospel adequate for rural life we must rediscover that gospel in the more primitive traditions which bring to us the life and teachings of Jesus. This is not to say that Paul has nothing to teach those who would bring the gospel to rural areas. Rather, it is to suggest that the teachings of Paul must be interpreted as having primary relevance to a given historical situation which was characterized by a highly urbanized culture. When we make room for that fact, then there is much in Paul's teachings that belongs to the rural church.

As we turn our attention to the Kingdom of God as interpreted by the rural-minded Christ of Nazareth, we find ourselves in a different climate. It is the same Kingdom, and yet, possibly because Jesus ministered to a different social and economic need or more possibly because Jesus himself manifested in his own life a radiance and joy never equalled by any of his followers, there is here a self-authenticating note. This is indeed the fountainhead of the Kingdom of God. Here is the gospel of salvation in its fresh simplicity, wherein the most unlearned countryman discovers a Voice that in a peculiar way speaks to him and his world. It is as if he had discovered a new Neighbor, with country ways like his own and with concepts that made new sense of the basic facts of rural life, bringing a new harmony to the rural scene.

What is this new Kingdom for rural life? Most certainly there is judgment in it, the same judgment which Paul and others so effectively preached to the cities. The countryside and the small villages and towns of Jesus' day were under this same judgment. Jesus did not speak in a sweet, kindly manner to his fellow Nazarenes as he stood up to preach in his home-town synagogue on a certain Sabbath morning. And yet judgment was a minor strain in a Kingdom that had a dominant major motif. The two major tones of the new world symphony were faith and love. He came not to condemn the world, but rather that the world might be saved.

At least four elements in the teachings of Jesus have great significance for an understanding of rural salvation. These can only be briefly touched upon. A book could be written on each of these four themes.

(1) Jesus revealed the Creator-Father, who not only made heaven and

earth but created man in his own image. Through Jesus we see him as the good Father, who loves us even when we are unresponsive to his love and who sends his blessings equally upon the just and the unjust. His providence can be trusted.

(2) Jesus lighted up the truth that the earth is good because God is good. The birds, the flowers of the field, the seed that grows from the grain to blade to ear -- all were to Jesus manifestations of God's benevolent sovereignty. The soil was good, for it brought forth thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.

(3) Jesus gave us assurance for having faith in our fellow men. He knew what was in man, both good and evil. Yet he had faith in the good potentialities of sinful people. He knew that through the exercise of a new love and a new faith it is possible for one to be transformed from moral weakness and instability to rock-like Christian character. Upon this basic insight he began to build his church -- the new society, the collective witness, the new community of God.

(4) Jesus revealed his faith in the final supremacy of good over evil, of life over death. Central in this teaching was his insistence upon the Cross as the road to life. He taught what was so consistently apparent in nature, that unless a seed die it cannot bring forth fruit. If one would save his life, he must lose it. The resurrection of Jesus was God's final answer to the question of whether or not the values proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus have permanence, including the value of human life itself.

SALVATION MUST BE COMPREHENSIVE

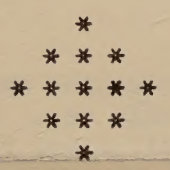
Translated into a practical ethic for rural salvation, these elements in the teaching of Jesus bear directly upon at least four relationships of the Christian countryman:

(1) his relationship to God;
(2) his relationship to the earth in his vocation;
(3) his relationship to his home; and
(4) his relationship to his church and community.

The Christian countryman is saved not only as he is brought into a new relationship to God as a forgiven sinner but also as he is brought into a way of life where his contacts with nature and with his fellow men are Christ-centered. Today we may take courage, those of us who live in rural America, that where God's nature is close at hand, where family life finds its most normal expression, and where people still cling to community living in spite of urban centripetal forces that pull against them, there God's Kingdom finds its most natural implementation. In the country the Kingdom is not fundamentally a protest movement but rather a religious force that is already in step with the deep rhythm of rural life. Of course, there will always be much in rural life to protest against. Rural inhabitants of farms and villages, farmers and nonfarmers, being human are also sinful. But they are sinful despite a God-given environment which is conducive to Christian living. It is the work of the church to open the eyes of rural people that they might see the potentialities of the Eden wherein God has put them.

Rural salvation will have become a glorious fact not only when the countryman is saved from his own selfishness and sin but when, as a fellow worker with God, he achieves a new sense of dignity in his vocation as he cooperates with God's soil, with plant and animal life to raise food and fibre for his fellow men and for himself; when he succeeds in establishing a Christian home where his children have opportunity to grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man; when, with his family, he becomes integrated into a vital Christian fellowship where Christian love and mutual aid become strong enough to create real Christian community in which there is no caste and where men bear one another's burdens, thus fulfilling the law of Christ.

If we would win America for Christ, we must begin at the grass roots. The Kingdom of God is not a sure-fire panacea which originates in conventions and is organized and "passed down" in the form of streamlined campaigns and programs for the saving of the nation. The Kingdom of God must take root in the hearts of people who walk quietly and humbly in God's holy ways. There it must grow. It is only as individuals and families and communities become truly Christian that the Kingdom comes. When the communities of America become genuinely Christian, then, and not until then, will the Kingdom of God be nigh unto us. This is the way to the saving of the nation.



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